

I Wasn't **READY**

RETAKING STEP

1

Olenka Caffo, MS, Class of 2020

“I don’t think you’re ready for third year,” said the professor observing my final OSCE encounter in my second year of medical school. I thought, “Is this true? After all the studying I have done and the classes I went through to get to this point? Why wasn’t I ready for 3rd year?” The professor kept saying, “You’re not performing at the level of your classmates.” I kept silent. “You’re probably worried about STEP 1 and your mind isn’t focused on this.” I kept thinking, “Why wasn’t I at the level of my classmates? We all took the same classes, had the same professors. When did I get lost?”

As soon as I was dismissed I went to talk to the course director. She gave me a clinical scenario and let me explain how I would handle that case. I talked her through what I would do and my differential diagnoses. She asked me more questions and I gave her my answers and reasonings. At the end, she told me she wasn’t worried about me. She realized that my thought process takes longer than most students, and that I spend more time thinking, which affects my timing in the tested encounters. She said that my thinking speed should improve with experience. It was good to hear that it wasn’t content I was missing, but that I needed to work on my thought process. Even though it was good to know I wasn’t lacking knowledge, it was hard to feel confident around my classmates. The insecurity seed was already planted in my

SUBWAY STEPS

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mind and it grew more as the days to take STEP came closer.

As everyone was studying for STEP, my fear of not being ready grew stronger. I noticed everyone was afraid of not passing, but I had an even greater fear because I had a history of not passing standardized tests. I always ended up taking any standardized test twice during high school. I couldn't help but think back to the times I had to retake my standardized tests in order to graduate. At that time, it was ok to take tests twice, but taking STEP 1 twice was not an option. All I heard was that I wasn't supposed to fail STEP 1. There was no talk about what would happen if you end up failing. What should I do first? Who should I contact? What would my schedule be? Is there any student who failed STEP 1 that I can ask for advice? All of these questions failed to be answered at that time.

My predicted NBME score was too low to be raised in the mere 6 weeks before the exam. I asked for more time to study and kept studying while most of my classmates were done with their exam. As the months went by I felt even more insecure. I was able to move my exam until July and decided to take a couple of days off to feel better about myself. Unfortunately, I had a conflict with a close friend that made me even more self-conscious and made me feel like my personality wasn't good enough to be around.

I took the test in July. My results came back, I failed STEP 1. I was no stranger to this and knew I had earned a label that I was going to carry with me from now on. My friends told me that this test didn't define me, and even though it was true, I felt like it did. It didn't define me as a person but it defined my future medical career. This test decided whether or not I was able to start my third year, and if I would continue my medical education, and it determined my residency options. I was given the option to retake it in 4 weeks but I knew that wasn't going to be enough time for me. I decided that I needed a break from school and went home to study and build my self-esteem and confidence, because even though it might seem silly, confidence plays a big role in how you make decisions when answering those questions.

At home, I was able to take a STEP 1 study course and focus on how to control my timing and improve my test taking skills. I knew I needed to fix those problems before continuing because this wasn't going to be my last standardized test, it was just the beginning. I experienced the side of academic medicine nobody talks about: failure. Since I didn't know anybody from school that had been through the same situation, I went online to look for

other students who had. I found plenty of anonymous students and learned that most, including myself, were ashamed about it.

I kept in touch with friends in my class. I couldn't imagine going through this feeling alone. The friend who I had the conflict with kept in touch with me and, ironically, in one of our conversations said something incredible, "I would be worried if you weren't scared." He was right, it was ok to feel scared about retaking STEP 1 and he made me feel more comfortable about having those emotions. It was normal to feel scared and nervous as long as those feelings weren't interfering with my thought process. Keeping in touch with my close friends gave me the motivation to keep going. I ended up taking 6 months off to focus on the course and study on my own. I retook Step 1 in December and received my score back in January. I was so nervous that I had to ask my brother to check for me. As soon as he told me the score I started crying. I couldn't believe it. I proved to myself that I could pass STEP 1 and didn't feel trapped anymore. This meant I could finally move on to 3rd year and it was unbelievable.

I learned that it's hard for students to mention their difficulties or failures during medical school. I saw that the culture of academic medicine makes it hard for students to express openly their difficulties to faculty and other students. There isn't much talk about how to overcome those obstacles and how it's normal to encounter them in your medical career. Even though I have learned more about myself from this experience, I know it affects my academic record. In order to feel more comfortable with my situation, I mention what happened to me to all the doctors I work with. I get different reactions every time, some are understanding and others not so much. But this helps me see the different perspectives they have on board exams. Despite the different opinions, I feel that I finally made it to the better side of academic medicine, the one that allows you to learn from patients, and that's the best feeling ever. ■

Olenka Caffo is a third year medical student. Originally from Lima, Peru, Olenka has lived in Fort Lauderdale since she was 9 years old. She went to undergrad at FSU and is a graduate of the Bridge Program at FSUCOM. She loves traveling and visiting new places to learn and see nature. Her favorite place to relax is the beach! While she has learned to try new foods, her favorite so far is still Peruvian food.